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AUTHOR Johns, Jerry L.; Ellis, DiAnn Waskul
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ABSTRACT

The concepts of reading held by students in grades one through eight are reported on in this paper. Over 1600 children were individually interviewed to obtain answers to the following three questions: What is reading? What do you do when you read? And What would you tell someone reading is if that person were just beginning? The findings reveal that the majority of students have little or no understanding of the reading process. It is concluded that teachers are not providing a basis for understanding the reading process when they teach reading. (Author/RB)

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READING: CHILDREN TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Jerry L. Johns and DiAnn Waskul Ellis
Northern Illinois University

Investigates concepts of reading given by students in grades one through eight.

Over 1,600 children were interviewed individually to obtain answers to the following three questions: 1) What is reading? 2) What do you do when you read? 3) If someone didn't know how to read, what would tell him/her that he/she would need to learn. The responses were recorded on audio tape and later classified into logical categories and analyzed.

The analysis revealed that the vast majority of students had little or no understanding of the reading process. Their views of reading were restricted and often described reading as an activity occuring in the classroom using a textbook, workbooks, or reading groups. Most of the meaningful responses described or defined reading as a decoding process. It was also evident that older students had a somewhat better understanding of the reading process than younger children. The investigators concluded that teachers are not necessarily providing a basis for understanding the reading process when they teach reading. Perhaps teachers should attempt to provide an understanding of the reading process and place additional emphasis on the role that meaning plays in reading. Suggestions were also given for future studies which could involve additional methods for exploring children's concepts of reading.

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Jerry L. Johns and DiAnn Waskul Ellis
Northern Illinois University

Over the years reading authorities have devoted considerable attention to a definition of the reading process. Clymer (1) contends that there may be no more important question to ask than "What is reading?" In addition, he views a clear concept of reading as more than an academic concern by noting that teachers should also understand the reading process. Stauffer (20), however, has expressed concern regarding teachers' concepts of reading. The responses of many teachers to the question "What is reading?" prompted Stauffer to conclude that "it is urgent that a better understanding of the concept of reading be acquired by teachers" (20:5).

If teachers do, in fact, lack a clear concept of reading, it is quite possible that they will not know whether students have attained the goals of their instructional programs. While it is important that teachers understand the reading process, children could probably benefit from this understanding too. In recent years, Goodacre (13) has identified the exploration of children's concepts of reading as a thought-provoking area worthy of study and research. To that end, a number of investigators have explored children's concepts of reading -- i.e. what reading involves and the child's understanding of the technical vocabulary (e.g., word and sound) often used by teachers.

Related Research

Since many articles and research studies have focused on children's perceptions of reading and the technical vocabulary used in teaching reading, only those investigations deemed most pertinent to the present study are

summarized. Also, in order to provide the reader with a perspective, those studies selected for the research review are presented in chronological order.

In 1958 Edwards (11) stated that "teaching would be simplified if there was some means of looking inside a child's head and finding out what his idea is in his approach to reading" (11:239). After interviewing 66 retarded readers, he concluded that some children lost sight of the "true" purpose of reading -- meaning. Later, Edwards (12) again emphasized that many children were unaware that getting meaning is the purpose of reading. This void of knowledge could produce slight to severe retardation in reading resulting in ineffective lifetime reading habits. To help remedy this situation, it was suggested that teachers help beginning readers see that the purpose of reading is getting meaning.

About this same time, Weintraub and Denny (21) sought to explore first graders' concepts of reading since so little was known about how the beginning reader views the reading act. The procedure involved asking 111 first-grade children three questions: Do you want to learn to read? Why? What must you do to learn to read in first grade? After classifying the data into logical categories, an analysis revealed that:

> slightly more than a third of all the responses given offered no meaningful explanation of what one must do to learn to read. Of the remaining responses, two-fifths indicated that a passive type of obedience was required to learn to read; slightly more than a fifth conveyed the notion that the teacher or someone else would show them how to read or gave some description of what the teacher would do in teaching reading; and less than two-fifths, 37 per cent, were responses in which children saw themselves as taking some action in learning to read (22:446).

Weintraub and Denny also urged helping students see a reason or purpose for learning to read as well as aiding them in gaining some insight into how reading will be accomplished.

In 1966 Reid (19) reported a study which explored a dozen five-year-old children's notions about reading through the use of structured interviews. Reid was also concerned with the children's general level of concept formation of the technical vocabulary involved in reading and writing. The findings revealed that the children approached reading with only the vaguest of expectancies. Successive interviews led to the conclusion that children who did not have a "correct" concept of a word were in a state of deeper confusion than children who possessed such knowledge. Although Reid's study did not focus directly on attempting to teach the children concepts associated with reading, it was noted that fostering the development of such concepts could be of prime importance in the teaching-learning process.

Mason (16) asked 178 pre-schoolers a series of questions to study their concepts of reading. Since many children gave a positive response to the question, "Do you like to read?" they were then asked: "Can you do it all by yourself?" Surprisingly, more than 90 per cent of the children gave affirmative replies. "It appears that most children believe that they can read before they go to school and that they like doing whatever it is that they define as reading" (16:131). By implication, Mason noted that "one of the first steps in learning to read is learning that one doesn't already know how. This seems to be a step in learning to read or in reading readiness which has been neglected and which appears worthy of exploration" (16:132).

A later investigation by Mason and Blanton (17) explored semantic constructs (understandings or reading) through a series of forty-two questions administered to 195 children ranging from ages three to six. A positive relationship existed between the children's understandings of reading and their scores on later reading achievement tests. It was concluded that teachers should ascertain their student's beliefs about reading before plunging directly into reading readiness or reading activities.

A large number of investigations and articles on concepts of reading have been generated by Downing (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10). One of his studies (8) was a replication of Reid's first interviews with five-year-old children. Downing's replication study confirmed Reid's conclusion that young children have only a vague notion of the purpose of reading and what activities are usually involved in reading. Downing (4) also investigated children's understanding of a word and a sound. He concluded that children have difficulty in understanding such terms.

In a subsequent report, Downing (9) cited Vernon's study of the causes in learning to read that led her to the conclusion that an important common symptom among disabled readers was a confusion regarding the nature of the reading task. Recently, Downing (10) elaborated on Vernon's "cognitive confusion" theory and indicated its relevance to the young child who is just beginning to read.

A 1969 study by Meltzer and Herse (18) offered support for the cognitive confusion theory. They found that kindergarten and first-grade children showed confusion over the concept of a word. A report (15) involving

older children in grades four through six noted that even at higher levels confusion exists with regard to reading. It was suggested that one of the contributing factors to some children's reading difficulties may be a failure to understand reading and what is involved in the reading process.

In summary, the bulk of previous research efforts have focused on the concepts and attitudes toward reading held by beginning readers and children not yet able to read. There have also been several attempts to explain how concepts about reading affect success in reading. It has also been reported (14) that there is a significant difference in how good and poor readers in the intermediate grades view the reading process. Since there is some indication that a child's concept of reading may be a contributing factor to reading achievement after the stage of beginning reading instruction, it may be beneficial to systematically explore children's views of reading through the grades. Such a study may offer findings which are of potential use to teachers as well as researchers. The present study was designed to fill this need.

The Problem

Many questions may be generated in investigating children's notions about reading. Do children acquire adequate concepts of reading in the process of being taught to read? Do older children, like younger children, lack an adequate understanding of the reading process? Are there any differences in the views of reading given by boys and girls? Do children acquire better concepts of reading as they progress through the grades? It was anticipated that the present exploratory investigation would provide tentative answers to the above questions.

Sample and Methodology

The 1,655 students from grades one through eight represented classes of children selected from several public elementary and middle schools located near a large midwest industrial area. The sample was assumed to represent the general expected ranges in intelligence and reading achievement. Informal pursual of students' backgrounds revealed a socio-economic status ranging from upper middle class to lower class. The vast majority of the 826 boys and 829 girls were white; however, there were a few Latino students.

Each child in the study was interviewed individually and the interview was recorded on audio tape and then transcribed for analysis and categorization. Graduate and undergraduate students in professional reading courses conducted the interview. Prior to actual data collection, the investigators trained the students in the techniques of the interview. A rationale for the study was presented and directions for collecting the data were distributed and discussed. The criteria for assigning responses from the interviews into a priori logical categories were also presented. Several actual responses from previous interviews were employed in the training procedure

Three questions were asked of the children interviewed: 1) What is reading? 2) What do you do when you read? and 3) If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him/her that he/she would need to learn? The children's responses were then transcribed and classified into logical categories. Over one-third of the children's responses were checked for accuracy of categorization.

The three questions which formed the basis of the investigation were analyzed separately. For each question, the responses were analyzed for general trends and differences in sex and grade. In analyzing sex differences in a given category, the chi-square test was used to determine whether or not significant differences existed.

Results for Question 1

The responses to question 1, "What is reading?" were classified in five categories. Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response, vague, circular, irrelevant, or "I don't know" responses. This category included responses such as: "Reading a book", "I really wouldn't know" and "A subject to learn to read".

Category 2: Classroom procedures and/or educational value. This category included responses such as: "Switch to a different class, do worksheets, read in books, workbooks, language workbooks, write it out", "Reading books out loud" and "Something that teaches you how to read like books and worksheets and workbook pages".

Category 3: Word Recognition/Decoding. This category included various responses such as: "Sounding out words", "Learning your vowel sounds" and "Words, sounds, and letters".

Category 4: Meaning or Understanding. This category included such responses as: "Enrich your mind by understanding what the author is trying to tell", "Understand the words in order to read" and "Sort of like looking at something and knowing what it says".

Category 5: Decoding and Understanding. This category included such responses as: "Recognizing words and understanding what they mean" and "Pronouncing words and thinking what they mean".

Table 1 summarizes the responses to question 1 and indicates the percentage of the total group that responded in a given category. An analysis of the responses to question 1 revealed the following:

1. There was an apparent lack of understanding of the reading process as evidenced by the high percentage of responses in categories 1 and 2. Of the 1,655 students asked "What is reading?" 69 per cent of the sample gave responses which were essentially meaningless.

2. The highest percentage of responses fell into category 2. Responses in this category focus on the procedures of teaching reading, doing workbook pages, reading in groups, and so on.

3. Only 5 per cent of the students viewed reading as a process involving both word recognition and meaning. This percentage is largely attributable to students in grades seven and eight. Of the 85 responses in category 5, only 22 came from students in grades one through six. This finding may offer some evidence that students' concepts of reading improve as they get older.

4. There were significant (.05 level) sex differences in the responses included in categories 1 and 5. Boys gave a greater number of vague and irrelevant responses while girls gave a greater number of responses which defined reading in terms of both decoding and understanding.

Results for Question 2

The responses to question 2, "What do you do when you read?" were also classified in five categories. Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response, vague, circular, irrelevant, or "I don't know" responses. This category included such responses as: "I can't really explain that", "I sit down" and "Practice studying with your eyes -- it exercises your eyes".

Category 2: Classroom procedures and/or educational value. This category included such responses as: "You read about Sally and Jane", "Work in workbook at back of room -- read silently and then read out loud" and "Have my marker. Follow every line and when you come to a period , the person next to you starts reading".

Category 3: Word Recognition/Decoding. This category included various responses such as: "You say the sounds of words, like the alphabet and 'b' in banana", "Sound out words like any other time" and "Kind of go from left to right and up and down and learn vowels".

Category 4: Meaning or Understanding. This category included such responses as: "You try to understand the meaning of words", "Like you're thinking about the plot and everything in the story" and "Try to get the point".

Category 5: Decoding and Understanding. This category included such responses as: "Look at words and read them and think what you are saying" and "You'd be looking at the words and understanding".

Table 2 summarizes the responses to question 2 and indicates the percentage of the total group that responded in a given category. An analysis of the responses to question 2 revealed the following:

1. Once again there was an apparent lack of understanding of reading reflected by the large number of responses in categories 1 and 2. Over 55 per cent of the responses fell into these two categories.

2. The highest percentage of responses fell into category 2 indicating that when students read they perceive that activity as involving interaction with their teacher, workbook pages, reading groups, and the like.

3. Only twenty students in every hundred indicated that they sought meaning when reading (combined totals of categories 4 and 5). Although responses in these two categories were scattered throughout the grades, students in grades six through eight comprised nearly two-thirds of the responses.

4. There were significant (.05 level) sex differences in the responses included in categories 4 and 5. Girls in both categories gave a significantly greater number of responses.

Results for Question 3

The responses to question 3, "If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him/her that he/she would need to learn?" were classified in five categories. Descriptions of the categories follow:

Category 1: No response, vague, circular, irrelevant or "I don't know" responses. This category included responses such as: "Ask your mom and dad", "Tell him to go home and study the words in the glossary" and "Maybe he has something wrong with his eyes or maybe he needs glasses".

Category 2: Classroom procedures and/or educational value. This category included responses such as: "He will have to go to special reading", "Get a book marker and a book" and "You have to work in your workbook".

Category 3: Word Recognition/Decoding. This category included various responses such as: "All his letters and the rules and the vowels", "Learn the basic words like 'us', 'I' and 'them'" and "Learn vowel sounds, consonant clusters and know what a subject is".

Category 4: Meaning or Understanding. This category included such responses as: "To know what the words mean" and "Follow directions and try to understand what he is reading".

Category 5: Decoding and Understanding. This category included such responses as: "Learn how to spell different words and be able to understand what they mean." "Sounds, words and thoughts" and "How to sound out words and how to know the letters and how to understand what the words mean".

Table 3 summarizes the responses to question 3 and indicates the percentage of the total group that responded in a given category. An analysis of the responses to question 3 revealed the following:

1. Approximately 36 per cent of the students were unable to give meaningful responses as evidenced by the combined percentages in categories 1 and 2.

2. There were more responses in category 3 than any other category. The majority of students appear to know that saying words is a part of reading but they tend to overemphasize this aspect at the expense of meaning -- the heart of reading.

3. Very few students indicated that one needs to seek meaning when learning to read. Of the responses which focused on meaning (categories 4 and 5), only a handful of responses came from grades one through six.

4. There were significant (.05 level) sex differences in the responses included in categories 1 and 5. Boys gave a greater number of vague and irrelevant responses while girls gave a greater number of responses which viewed reading as a process of decoding and understanding.

Major Conclusions

Based upon the findings related to each question and a synthesis of the data, the following conclusions appear to be justified:

1. Many students have little or no understanding of the reading process.

2. Older students have a somewhat better understanding of the reading process than younger students.

3. There were few sex differences in the data. However, when differences existed it was revealed that boys gave more vague or irrelevant responses than girls. Also, girls appeared to be more aware of the fact that decoding and meaning were essential for reading.

4. Most of the meaningful responses described reading as a decoding process. It may be that teachers are over-emphasizing decoding or "sounding out" strategies to the exclusion of the role meaning plays in reading.

5. Many children have a very restricted view of reading. They described reading as an activity occuring in the classroom or school environment which utilized a textbook.

Recommendations for Teacher and Researchers

It would appear that teachers should not assume that because they are teaching children to read they are also providing a basis for understanding the reading process. Perhaps an effort should be made to help children understand the reading process. Previous research would tend to support this recommendation. To help build a concept of reading, the following technique, used successfully with children, is suggested.

Write kingcup on the chalkboard. Ask a student to say the word. Ask other children whether or not they agree. Continue the process until the class agrees that the word is kingcup. Then ask some children if they can read the word. Most children will probably say that they can read the word because they view reading as merely decoding or word recognition.

When this point is reached, ask the class, "How do you know you can read the word?" Many children will respond by saying "I can read the word because I can pronounce it." Sooner or later a student is likely to ask what the word means. At this point, lead students to the conclusion that reading involves understanding. It might be useful to make a distinction between being able to say the word and knowing what the word means.

The above suggestion represents a meager but fruitful beginning. It is doubtful that all students will grasp a worthwhile concept of reading during an initial presentation. It will probably take considerable teaching to develop the role of meaning in reading, but it is not very difficult to evaluate whether or not students are developing the notion that reading must involve meaning. Suppose a student says, "I don't know how to read dugout. I can pronounce the word, but I don't know what it means." It is obvious from such a statement that this student recognizes a worthy distinction between pronouncing a word and knowing what a word means.

As teachers attempt to build a concept of reading with their students, researchers could conduct investigations to learn whether or not efforts to "teach" children a concept of reading results in gains in reading achievement. One could also explore concepts of reading through a single question such as "What is reading?", in depth interviews, and/or questionnaires. Researchers might also explore the answers that children give in terms of socialization in our society. For instance, why do some boys indicate that "reading is sissy stuff?' There is no need to focus on only one method to explore children's concepts of reading. By using a variety of techniques it is possible that an effective means for evaluating children's concepts of reading would emerge.

Concluding Statement

The present investigation clearly demonstrates that children in grades one through eight have greatly disparate views of the reading process. Although older students have a somewhat better understanding of the process than younger children, it is disturbing to note that the vast majority of children have little or no understanding of the reading process.

It is clear that teachers and researchers need to renew their efforts to help students understand the process that is so essential to learning. It may be that those who are good readers know what reading is all about. Helping others who lack a meaningful concept of reading may enhance their progress in reading. The quest must be pursued.

TABLE 1. Distribution of Responses to the Question, "What is reading?"

Group	Category 1 I don't know Vague, Irrelevant		Category 2 Classroom Procedures or Educational Value		Category 3 Word Recognition (Decoding)		Category 4 Meaning or Understanding		Category 5 Decoding and Understanding				
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Total
Grade 1	58	46	21	24	21	7	3	1	0	1	103	79	182
Grade 2	57	46	46	48	17	28	1	1	1	0	122	123	245
Grade 3	35	38	51	28	18	16	8	11	1	2	113	95	208
Grade 4	51	40	51	57	20	13	4	3	3	3	129	116	245
Grade 5	25	13	29	29	6	3	3	5	2	3	65	53	118
Grade 6	19	11	21	31	10	10	6	10	4	2	60	64	124
Grade 7	34	21	31	58	24	32	23	29	12	17	124	157	281
Grade 8	25	28	33	37	19	15	24	37	9	25	110	142	252
Total Boys and Girls	304	243	283	312	135	124	72	97	32	53	826	829	1,655
Number of Responses	547		595		259		169		85		1,655		
Per Cent of All Responses	33%		36%		16%		10%		5%		100%		

TABLE 2. Distribution of Responses to the Question, "What do you do when you read?"

Group	Category 1 I don't know Vague, Irrelevant		Category 2 Classroom Procedures or Educational Value		Category 3 Word Recognition (Decoding)		Category 4 Meaning or Understanding		Category 5 Decoding and Understanding				
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Total
Grade	41	36	27	22	30	19	5	2	0	0	103	79	182
Grade 2	30	19	53	70	33	30	5	3	1	1	122	123	245
Grade 3	10	18	54	39	32	20	15	16	2	2	113	95	208
Grade 4	34	26	55	44	30	29	6	14	4	3	129	116	245
Grade 5	18	16	25	16	9	8	8	11	5	2	65	53	118
Grade 6	11	8	14	24	10	8	20	16	5	8	60	64	124
Grade 7	23	30	31	35	27	26	28	39	15	27	124	157	281
Grade 8	22	20	35	28	25	28	16	34	12	32	110	142	252
Total Boys and Girls	189	173	294	278	196	168	103	135	44	75	826	829	1,655
Number of Responses	362		572		364		238		119		1,655		
Per Cent of All Responses	22%		35%		22%		14%		7%		100%		

Table 3. Distribution of Responses to the Question, "If someone didn't know how to read, what would you tell him/her that he/she would need to learn?"

Group	Category 1 I don't know Vague, Irrelevant		Category 2 Classroom Procedures or Educational Value		Category 3 Word Recognition (Decoding)		Category 4 Meaning or Understanding		Category 5 Decoding and Understanding				
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Total
Grade 1	28	17	43	33	31	28	1	1	0	0	103	79	182
Grade 2	21	11	28	39	69	71	3	2	1	0	122	123	245
Grade 3	16	12	28	25	64	57	4	0	1	1	113	95	208
Grade 4	22	16	28	28	76	63	1	3	2	6	129	116	245
Grade 5	9	7	15	6	37	38	2	2	2	0	65	53	118
Grade 6	9	3	12	9	36	41	1	8	2	3	60	64	124
Grade 7	20	21	10	16	71	96	11	5	12	19	124	157	281
Grade 8	11	12	22	24	64	77	3	5	10	24	110	142	252
Total Boys and Girls	136	99	186	180	448	471	26	26	30	53	826	829	1,655
Number of Responses	235		366		919		52		83		1,655		
Per Cent of All Responses	14%		22%		56%		3%		5%		100%		

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